



Play Modifications for Children with Disabilities

Susan R. Sandall

Children with disabilities and other special needs may have difficulty participating in play activities. Teachers can use a variety of modifications and adaptations to help the child take part in and learn from play. These modifications and adaptations will be most useful when the teacher observes that the child is interested in the ongoing activities but is unable to fully participate.

In the chart that follows, I and several colleagues identify eight categories of curriculum modifications that teachers can use in their classrooms. Creative teachers will think of many other modifications. The critical steps are to observe the child's play and match the level of support to the child's need.

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Type of modification	Description	Examples
Environmental support	The teacher alters the physical, social, and/or temporal environment.	For a child who may wander from center to center, make a photo display of the centers so the child can select from the photos to make an individual schedule of what she plans to do.
Materials adaptation	The teacher modifies the play materials so that the child can manipulate them.	For a child who does not have the strength to stand for long periods of time, make a simple tabletop easel to let the child sit in a chair while painting.
Simplifying the activity	The teacher simplifies a complicated activity by breaking it into smaller parts or reducing the number of steps.	For the child who is interested in table games but overwhelmed by the parts and pieces, describe the steps in clear, simple terms and draw the child pictures so she can follow the steps.
Using child preferences	The teacher uses the child's preferred material, activity, or person to encourage the child to play.	For the child who loves trains and has not yet explored the dramatic play area, develop a train station theme for the area or train-motif placemats in the housekeeping area.
Special equipment	The teacher uses special or adaptive devices to allow the child's access to and participation in the activity.	For the child who uses a wheelchair, which places him at a different height than the other children, ask the therapist about using a beanbag chair for floor-time activities.
Adult support	The teacher or another adult in the classroom joins the child's play and encourages involvement through modeling and commenting.	For the enthusiastic child who is often on the verge of losing control, go to the play area and join the child's play to slow down the pace and talk about the children's play.
Peer support	The teacher uses peers and helps them join a child's play to give encouragement through modeling and commenting.	For the child who has difficulty with activities that require several steps (such as making a collage or building a castle), pair the child with a buddy. The two can then take turns participating in the activity.
Invisible support	The teacher arranges naturally occurring events within an activity to increase the probability of the child's success.	For the child who is not yet speaking or has difficulty making others understand, place photos or picture symbols in the play area so that the child can use them to increase peers' understanding.

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